

SOUTH FORK OWYHEE RIVER WILDERNESS STUDY AREA

1. THE STUDY AREA - 51,632 acres

The South Fork Owyhee River WSA (ID-16-53/NV-010-103A), located in Owyhee County, Idaho, and Elko County, Nevada, about 100 miles northwest of Elko, Nevada, includes 43,790 acres of BLM land in Idaho, a 160-acre private inholding in Idaho, and 7,842 acres of BLM land in Nevada, for a total of 51,632 acres of BLM land. Primitive dirt roads, fence lines, and legal subdivisions along private lands bound the WSA in Idaho. Primitive dirt roads, fence lines, and a natural gas pipeline bound the WSA in Nevada. Four cherrystem roads (6½ miles) enter the WSA. The northern portion adjoins the Little Owyhee River WSA (ID-16-48C) and the Owyhee River Canyon WSA (ID-16-48B/OR-3-195); the southern end adjoins the Owyhee Canyon WSA (NV-010-106).

2. RECOMMENDATION AND RATIONALE -

50,135	acres recommended for wilderness
2,662	acres recommended for nonwilderness

The 50,135 acres recommended for wilderness would protect 19½ miles of spectacularly scenic canyons and 40,145 acres of surrounding plateaus. Some 1,165 acres of BLM land in Idaho adjacent to the WSA were also recommended for wilderness and were included to provide a more definable wilderness boundary. The area appears natural, has outstanding opportunities for solitude and for primitive and unconfined recreation, and offers significant special features. The area is manageable to protect wilderness values over the long term. The 50,135 acres recommended for wilderness are part of a proposed 385,080-acre Owyhee Canyonlands wilderness that would include about 270 miles of desert canyon, 164 miles of whitewater boating opportunities, and 292,640 acres of plateau.

At the WSA's southern end in Nevada, 2,662 acres are recommended for other uses. This area would allow for a utility corridor along the existing Paiute Pipeline. This corridor was identified through the BLM's planning process.

3. WILDERNESS CHARACTERISTICS

A. Naturalness: The South Fork Owyhee River WSA is a flat to hilly sagebrush, bitterbrush, and bunchgrass-covered plateau sharply dissected by 20 miles of canyons, including 17 miles of the South Fork Owyhee River. The South Fork canyon is 500 to 800 feet deep, narrow, and very meandering. The canyon walls that are not vertical are covered with sagebrush and bunchgrasses, while the riparian areas are narrow bands of lush grasses, rushes, and sedges. Wildlife includes California bighorn sheep, mule deer, pronghorn antelope, mountain lion, bobcat, coyote, river otter, beaver, raptors, waterfowl, chukar and other birds, and redband trout. The WSA is predominantly natural. Man's imprints are limited to widely dispersed rangeland developments including six small stock ponds, 14½ miles of ways, 6½ miles of cherrystem roads, and fences on the plateau. Imprints within the canyon are limited to some historic ruins. The Paiute Pipeline and accompanying road can be seen from a small portion of the WSA's southern part.

B. Solitude: The WSA's outstanding opportunities for solitude are attributed to the isolated seclusion of the canyonlands and the vastness of the desert plateaus. The meandering character of the canyons and water courses provides excellent topographic screening between visitor groups traveling close together. The depth of the canyons, combined with limited viewing distances, creates a tremendous sense of seclusion from the rest of the world. The lengths of canyons allow visiting groups to readily find campsites out of sight and sound of other groups and to adjust their travel rates to avoid any interaction.

From high points on the plateau, thousands of square miles of open space, stretching from the Steens Mountains in Oregon to Juniper Mountain in Idaho to the Bull Run Mountains in Nevada, are visible. These vast, open spaces instill a sense of complete separation from civilization.

Military aircraft sometimes disrupt the solitude. The southwest corner of Idaho is a Military Operations Area for training fighter and bomber pilots in low elevation, subsonic flight. Aircraft fly as low as 100 feet above the plateau's surface. Due to variations in flight patterns and schedules, impacts to solitude vary greatly from day to day and week to week. At times, aircraft can be seen and/or heard all day. Other times, one can travel for days and not see or hear a military jet.

C. Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: The scenic natural features and landform diversity contribute to outstanding opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation, including hunting, backpacking, river running, and the associated activities of sight-seeing, photography, wildlife viewing, botanical studies, and fishing. River running opportunities on the South Fork Owyhee River are exceptional.

The miles of canyons, their diverse and eroded rock landscapes, and their steep slopes create a sense of isolation, enhancing the primitive recreation experience. Visitors traveling in or near the canyons are constantly aware of the forces of nature.

The challenge and excitement of whitewater rapids add significantly to the boating experience. Hiking the rugged canyons and plateau without the aid of established trails provides an arduous challenge that heightens the primitive recreation experience.

The many talus slopes encourage visitors to travel between the river and plateau. Recreational use of the plateau concentrates near the canyon rims, which often offer less arduous hiking conditions than those in the canyons and provide spectacular canyon vistas. Hiking on the plateau provides an opportunity to experience vast, open spaces.

D. Special Features: The WSA is rich in special features, including scenic, scientific, wildlife and cultural values. The special features contribute significantly to the overall quality of the wilderness characteristics.

The canyons of the South Fork Owyhee River are of exceptionally high scenic quality. The combination of moving water, colorful sheer cliffs, grass-covered talus slopes, and blue sky creates a dramatic stark beauty that totally envelopes the visitor. In places, reddish-brown cliffs drop hundreds of feet to the water. Brilliant green, yellow, and orange microflora tint the fractured, blocky rock monoliths. Eroded spires frequently top the monoliths. Near the base of the cliffs, water sometimes seeps from fractures to nourish small, lush, clinging, deep green plant communities. The sheer rock walls often give way to steep slopes covered with mosaics of red rock rubble and subdued green and yellow vegetation.

Sensitive wildlife species include California bighorn sheep, bobcat, river otter, and redband trout. Of particular concern is the bighorn sheep, a species dependent upon wildlands habitat. Bighorn sheep were reintroduced into the canyon complex in 1985.

Sensitive plant species found in the WSA include *Eatonella nives*, *Lupinus uncialis*, *Artemisia packardiae*, and *Malacothrix*.

The WSA contains both historic and prehistoric archaeological sites. Prehistoric sites are found on the plateau and in caves and rock shelters within the canyons. Historic sites include rock walls and the ruins of several stone buildings along the river.

4. MANAGEABILITY

The WSA is manageable in the long term. There are no conflicting resource uses. The WSA is over 27 miles from a paved highway. Vehicle access to the WSA boundaries is mostly along minimally constructed and maintained dirt roads. Much of the plateau is relatively flat, but areas close to the canyons are strewn with rock rubble and are impassible to vehicles.

5. ENERGY AND MINERAL RESOURCE VALUES

The area has low potential for all metallic minerals and energy resources. There are no mining claims or oil and gas leases. Sand and gravel deposits are present. Volcanic rocks, potentially usable as dimension stone or decorative rock are widespread, but larger deposits are available in more accessible areas.

Chalcedony and common opal may have been recovered from three prospects in the WSA's northern part. The lack of bright, interesting colors and patterns limits their value and marketability for lapidary uses.

6. SUMMARY OF WSA-SPECIFIC PUBLIC COMMENTS

The BLM received 117 comments on the draft Owyhee Canyonlands Wilderness EIS; 48 supported all WSAs or portions of all WSAs in the Owyhee Canyonlands complex as wilderness, 46 opposed any wilderness in the WSA complex, and 23 had no position. Those in favor of wilderness for the South Fork Owyhee River WSA supported designating the entire WSA as wilderness for long-term protection of wildlife, vegetation, and other natural resources. Opposition to any of the WSAs becoming wilderness was based upon a desire for improved livestock management opportunities, the need for continued use of the area for motorized recreation, the need to have further opportunities to explore for and possibly develop mineral and energy resources, and the need to potentially develop utility corridors.

Government agencies took the following positions: the Fish and Wildlife Service supported wilderness designation; the Bonneville Power Administration did not object to wilderness designation provided there was adequate consideration given to utility corridors; the U.S. Air Force supported wilderness if no significant restrictions were placed on military overflights; the Bureau of Reclamation had no objection to wilderness; the Governor of Nevada, the Nevada State Office of Community Services, the Nevada Department of Wildlife, the Nevada Division of State Parks, and the Idaho Department of Fish and Game supported wilderness designation; the Nevada Bureau of Mines and Geology and the Nevada Department of Minerals could not endorse wilderness until more geological data was available; and the Idaho Air National Guard opposed wilderness, as did the local governments of Owyhee and Elko counties.

Following the conclusion of the public comment period for the draft Owyhee Canyonlands Wilderness EIS, but before the completion of the final EIS, the BLM received 78 comments. One opposed any wilderness designation in the WSA complex, one took no position, and 76 supported wilderness designation. Of the wilderness advocates, 61 supported designating the entire South Fork Owyhee River WSA as wilderness. Most of the wilderness support was in response to a "flyer" sent out by the Committee for Idaho's High Desert and to a Sierra Club "alert."